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Tibetan Self-Determination: A Stark Choice for an Abandoned People

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Tibet and the People's Republic of China

Self-determination of peoples – the right of peoples to determine their own political destiny (Kaczorowska 2010: 574) – reverberates around the world in the context both of peoples and nations trying to break away from the state in which they find themselves entrapped, and of peoples within states seeking greater rights for themselves against authoritarian rulers. Events in the Arab Spring have brought to the fore rebellion and also potential fragmentation of states. Yet all of this is nothing new.

As an example, the plight of the Tibetan people has attracted international attention for more than sixty years. The government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) sent troops into Tibet in 1950, completing a successful invasion – or liberation, depending on the viewpoint taken – in the autumn of 1951 when the People's Liberation Army entered Lhasa, the Tibetan capital. Tibetan proponents contend that this represented an invasion that ended the independence of Tibet (e.g. Goldstein 1989: 813); the PRC contends that “both the Chinese and Tibetan peoples were anxiously awaiting the region's ‘liberation’ from oppressive colonialism and reactionary exploitation” (Ginsburgs 1960: 339). Despite the attention Tibet has attracted, the Tibetan people find that they remain today within and a part of the PRC, the majority of historical Tibet forming the Tibet Autonomous Region. Self-determination does not always prove to be easy.

It may be asked why Tibet has failed to achieve the genuine autonomy it seeks, let alone separation from the PRC, and, indeed, the statehood it craves (Dickinson 2012). Kosovo might be seen as an example of an autonomous region that has in recent years achieved independence, and it has proved possible to overthrow governments in states such as Egypt (Dickinson 2012; 2013).

Ineffective Tibetan Claims

The ineffectiveness of Tibetan claims trace back to the 1950s: in 1950, no state came to the aid of the Tibetans and Tibet's claim for full political independence found no state support. No resolutions were passed by the United Nations (UN) Security Council or General Assembly at a time when states were preoccupied with the Korean question, the Korean War having broken out in June 1950. No UN General Assembly resolution succeeded until 1959, and only three in all have to date been passed.¹ These resolutions refer to the “fundamental human rights and freedoms” of the people of Tibet, and the second of the resolutions refers to “their right to self-determination.” However, the PRC has not complied with the resolutions, and its current position as a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council appears to give it immunity in this context, reinforcing its claim that Tibet is an internal Chinese matter not brooking external interference. Member states of the UN have not been prepared to oppose the PRC over the issue of Tibet, and realism in the form of political self-interest has prevailed.

As Tibetan claims have languished, the PRC has gained in power over the last six decades, strengthening its hold on its territory. It has been criticised on numerous occasions for human rights abuses within its territory, for example with regard to Tibet and also with reference to the crackdown on protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Despite that, however, the prestige and position of the PRC has progressively been enhanced. The PRC is currently an elected member state of the UN Human Rights Council, and in the elections the candidate states' contribution "to the promotion and protection of human rights" was taken into account (UN General Assembly 2006).

If Tibetan claims have proved to be ineffective, what is needed to successfully achieve self-determination in the face of opposition from a parent state?

Prerequisites for Self-Determination

There has been increasing fragmentation of states over recent years, in parallel to increased integration as globalisation continues apace. This is incipient in, for example, Canada and Australia, where indigenous peoples seek greater powers, and has become transparent in the once-unified Soviet Union and also the former Yugoslavia, now both largely broken up into their constituent parts. The Soviet Union, though, consented to its own break-up, and a right to self-determination for its constituent republics was enshrined in its constitution. Thus, self-determination in the form of consensual secession determined the outcome of the collapse of Soviet power.

This may be contrasted with the PRC, which maintains its hold on power and whose constitution emphasises the unity of the country (for example, see Article 52 of the Constitution of China 1982). However, other multinational states have disintegrated along national or ethnic lines. Self-determination is likely to be the harbinger of "discontent, disorder and rebellion" (words of Robert Lansing, Secretary of State to Woodrow Wilson, cited in Talbott 2000: 15); indeed it is discontent that leads to a quest for self-determination in the first instance. Nevertheless, rebellion may be seen as key – and violent rebellion, at that. This is highlighted in the context of the former Yugoslavia. Declarations of independence came from Slovenia and Croatia in June 1991, and ultimately the state broke up into constituent parts in a surge of violence and what came to be known as "ethnic cleansing." One of the entities breaking away was, as indicated above, Kosovo. There are two points of significance for Tibet here. The first point is that an autonomous region of a state has been able to separate from a parent state. Although Kosovo's statehood has yet to be recognised by the international community and it has not been accorded membership of the UN, more than half of UN Members have formally or informally recognised the Republic of Kosovo and the list is growing (Wolff and Rodt 2013). The second point is that violent rebellion may be seen as a prerequisite for unilateral secession from a parent state – and secession is the logical extreme of external self-determination (Dickinson 2014). That violent civil disobedience is a genuine and credible strategy for entities seeking self-determination is

evidenced further by the only other entity that has, arguably, successfully achieved secession in opposition to its parent state: Bangladesh.

It is feasible, therefore, to say that non-consensual secession – external self-determination – is characterised by violent revolution. Internal self-determination, the right of a people to govern through autonomy, forms the second strand of self-determination. This, too, can be characterised by violence, as has been only too evident from 2011 onwards in the events of the Arab Spring, for example, in Egypt, Libya and Syria. Syria is particularly interesting in this regard as the state spirals into disorder and civil war. Militant groups achieve ascendancy, and fragmentation of the state appears ever more likely.

Thus, from each aspect of contested self-determination, external and internal, it can be argued that violent revolution is a precondition, a precursor, and, apparently, an essential ingredient. It is not, however, sufficient. Beyond this, there needs to be the support of the people; a case made for self-determination and accepted by the people. This is necessary with reference to either secession or internal self-determination, the latter potentially leading to the overthrow of the government. Even then, the case for self-determination, the support of the people for self-determination, and the violent revolution may prove insufficient, as instanced in the unfolding situation in Egypt.

Beyond these factors, support of the international community is significant. Such support has already been noted in the case of Kosovo, where the final outcome is as yet unresolved, although the momentum towards the ultimate recognition of Kosovo through membership of the UN seems clear. Of course, Bangladesh received international support, including initially military support from India, at the time of its violent secession from Pakistan,² and was admitted to membership of the UN on 17 September 1974. International support is also relevant where internal self-determination through overthrow of an existing regime is sought. For example, in the Arab Spring, the opposition found international support in overthrowing the authoritarian regime of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya; in Syria, little international support was forthcoming for the revolutionaries and, for the time being, President al-Assad remains in power.

The impact of the Internet and social media may also prove to be of significance, both in terms of rallying support to the cause and in garnering international support, for as the age of social media dawns, people become ever more aware of the plight of others. States are no longer the sole controllers of reaction to events, and the news agenda is not so much driven by the traditional mass media, but the ability of the masses to go on-line and inform the minds of others. Those who wish to inform can. This has become evident in the context of the Arab Spring, for instance, in Egypt, where Facebook campaigns were used to mobilise and underpin civil disobedience (Dickinson 2013: 64). Not all states, though, will be susceptible to media campaigns, whether campaigns of the traditional media or the new media.

Tibet

Some peoples, as demonstrated, have achieved secession in the face of parent state opposition, and some governments have been successfully overthrown. Tibet, however, is an entity that seems to have been left well behind in the self-determination stakes. A consideration of the prerequisites for self-determination demonstrates clearly why this has been the case.

First, it has been premised that violent rebellion, setting in force revolution, is a precursor of self-determination, and apparently an essential ingredient, although not sufficient in itself. There has been, in Tibet, sporadic violence and insurrection during the last sixty years and more. The 1950-51 invasion and liberation was not unopposed; further, insurrection broke out, for instance, in 1958 and 1959, and also in 1987 and 1988. Nevertheless, sustained, forceful, and effective rebellion against a powerful state, such as the PRC, intent on maintaining the integrity of its territory and the unity of the country, is impractical – and may be contrasted with the success achieved by Kosovo in breaking free from Serbia, the rump successor state of Yugoslavia. There is a qualitative difference between the size and power of the PRC, on the one hand, and Serbia – or, indeed, Yugoslavia in its earlier incarnation – on the other.

Moreover, Tibetans have not found support for their cause in the international arena. Just as at the outset, in the 1950s, the international situation on the Korean peninsula trumped the issue of Tibet and there was little support then for the Tibetan position, no international support would be found now for a violent revolution as the PRC takes its place in the mainstream of human rights protection and grows in confidence. In addition, governments of states such as the United States of America (USA) and Russia deem it is not in their best interests to oppose the PRC over Tibet: for example, the USA pursues its economic self-interest and Russia is mindful of the need to protect its own position in the face of actions by Chechen separatists. As a further point to note, and as a deterrent to international support for the Tibetans, the United Kingdom government felt the wrath of the PRC following a meeting of Prime Minister David Cameron with the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader, in 2013 (Moore and Quinn 2013).

Neither the USA nor Russia – both major powers in the world – would wish to set the agenda and engage directly with the power of the PRC over an issue such as self-rule for the indigenous Tibetans. Indeed, in contrast to the majority of states that have, in one way or another, recognised the Republic of Kosovo, no state today recognises Tibet as an independent state.

To achieve secession or genuine autonomy against the wishes of a parent state, or to overthrow an existing regime outside the ballot box, it is argued that an entity needs first to have a clear and cohesive case to buttress its argument, to back that up with violent revolution, today successfully utilising social media to establish support for its claims, and attract international support to its cause. Tibetan society is founded on Buddhism and non-violence. That, in itself, ensures that widespread, cohesive Tibetan support for concerted violence is unlikely; violent

revolution seems certain to fail in this instance in the face of the powerful PRC and, indeed, could premise the destruction of Tibet and the Tibetan people. This is a stark choice indeed. As a people, Tibetans have been abandoned to their fate by the international community.

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Endnotes

- 1 These are United Nations General Assembly Resolutions 1353 (XIV) in 1959, 1723 (XVI) in 1961, and 2079 (XX) in 1965.

- 2 Not all commentators are of the view that Bangladesh falls within the principle of self-determination, preferring the view that Bangladesh emerged “as a *fait accompli* achieved as a result of foreign military assistance in special circumstances” (Crawford 2006: 415-6).